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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses and demonstrates how to use children's interests combined with children's literature to make learning easier. According to the paper, the concept is to choose an area that excites children, one where they already have a developed schemata or knowledge base, then to use children's trade books about that topic to teach the skills and strategies that build stronger readers. The paper uses the theme of a love of cats as an example of an interdisciplinary approach to teach a variety of reading skills, strategies, and genre and opines that this same approach is effective with any topic that interests children. It lists the benefits of using an interdisciplinary teaching approach and provides examples of how to accomplish this approach. It then outlines several literary genres--fantasy, realistic fiction, poetry, content information--and provides some examples and activities which can be adapted to different grade levels by changing the materials and directions. The paper concludes by summarizing key points when using an interdisciplinary approach. (Contains 7 references and an extensive bibliography of "cat books" in various genres. Lists 7 web sites.) (NKA)

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Teaching With Cats: Integration of Children's Interests and Literature to Enhance Reading Comprehension

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Reading instruction that uses topics familiar to children makes learning new information easier and increases comprehension.

Individuals learn more rapidly when engaged in meaningful activities that interest them.

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TEACHING WITH CATS:
INTEGRATION OF CHILDREN'S INTERESTS AND LITERATURE TO ENHANCE READING COMPREHENSION

The world of today's children is more complicated than in the past. There is a larger volume of information available in a wider variety of forms and more text in non-fiction format. Teaching methods used in the past need to change to meet new needs. Children can no longer learn just facts as in prior times. Readers now need more skills and knowledge of how to find, use, and communicate information.

This presentation will discuss and demonstrate how to use children's interests combined with children's literature to make learning easier. The concept is to choose an area that excites children, one where they already have a developed schemata or knowledge base, then to use children's trade books about that topic to teach the skills and strategies that build stronger readers. I have always loved cats, and I know that many children do too, so I choose that theme as an example of an interdisciplinary approach to teach a variety of reading skills, strategies, and genre. This same approach is effective with any topic that interests children.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Classroom practices have often divided the school day into compartmentalized subjects. Little was done to make connections for children between the various content areas or to demonstrate the use of the same skills across disciplines. National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) recommends focusing instruction on integrated, interdisciplinary activities revolving around a topic that interests children (NCTE, 1995).

What is an interdisciplinary approach? It is looking at a topic from various perspectives and subject areas, using fiction as well as non-fictions trade books and other sources of print information. It is building a large picture of the topic across content areas. Students read widely and use the information gathered to predict, retell, verify, question, and summarize as they pull their information together. Students learn to prepare ways to present or share the knowledge gained with others (Baumann, Hooten, & White, 1999). An interdisciplinary approach allows learners to connect new knowledge they are gaining with their prior knowledge about the topic. They have a variety of opportunities to build their competencies through meaningful writing, reading, listening, and talking, all skills they will need throughout their lives.

Teachers identify areas or subjects that interest their children, collect materials, and build lessons and activities around those materials to make the many connections that enhance learning. Tevebaugh, (2001) stated that " . . . there is indeed much credence to the current theories surrounding cross-curricular instruction and providing student autonomy in learning. The methods we use might differ somewhat, depending on the students with whom we work, but the concepts remain the same. The time for separating language arts and skills instruction from academic subjects has passed. In today's increasingly connected society, students must develop a sense of interdependence and an understanding of possible relationships between diverse endeavors and areas of study" (p. 346-347). Students taught using trade books with activities have significant gains in concept acquisition over students taught with textbooks and activities. They also acquire more concepts and a greater understanding of the concepts (Gussettee, Kowalinski, and McGowan, 1992).

Teachers should be striving to create lifelong readers and learners. To do this students need numerous opportunities to use authentic reading situations within the classroom environment to practice the skills they will use in their life outside of school (Hiebert & Colt,

1989). "Juxtaposing fiction and nonfiction builds on the natural curiosity of students. The fictional accounts draw readers into the story world while the nonfiction texts add facts and depth to the students' understanding" (Gilles & Mitchell, 2001, p. 579).

The following are benefits of using an interdisciplinary teaching approach built on children's interests:

- Children's curiosity about a topic aids learning by capitalizing on their interests, background knowledge, and strengths. Capitalizing on their interests increases positive attitudes.

- Addressing multiple content areas helps students grasp the connections between subjects more easily than using a compartmentalized approach to instruction. Learning important concepts and ideas across curricular areas is simpler.

- Using real world or authentic activities such as researching, collecting and synthesizing data to statistical or narrative reports and sharing the information with others, unlike prepared materials which are not related to students' needs, increases connections to real world situations. This also incorporates higher level math and language skills.

- Moving outside textbooks exposes readers to the variety of genre in trade books containing material about their interest. It makes it easier to recall pertinent information and helps teach the value of different opinions and sources of information. This allows studying a topic in depth and from various perspectives.

Consider these points when choosing a topic and content to use:

- Use children's curiosity about a subject to add interest to the learning.

- Use national, regional, state or province standards as curriculum guidelines.

- Look for logical connections to tie subjects together.

- Use authentic activities, not decontextualized activities. Create the kinds of situations in which people engage and learn outside of school.

- Begin with what the learner knows. Using topics that are within their experiences enables students to more easily comprehend new information.

EXAMPLES OF HOW TO ACCOMPLISH AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

The rest of the presentation will demonstrate materials and ways of using the theme of cats to implement an interdisciplinary approach. The activities can be adapted to any grade level.

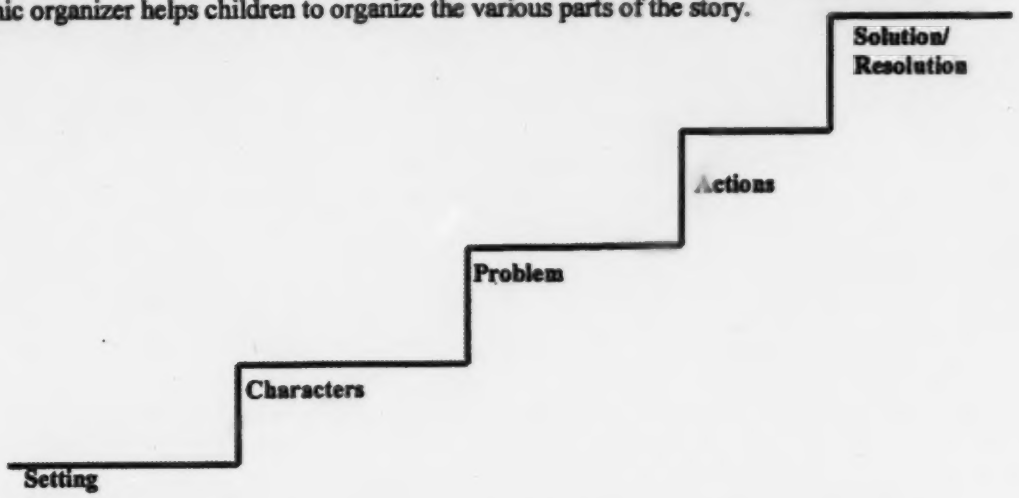
Why cats? An interest in cats goes back centuries. Cats have been worshiped, thought to be magical, and also thought to be witches or from the devil; but they have always fascinated people. In Ireland in the 8th century, a monk wrote the poem *Pangur Ban* about his cat. Celts believed the eyes of a cat acted like windows to the palaces of fairy kings. The kings could look out and watch the world through the cat's eyes and people could look deeply into a cat's eyes and see the world of fairies.

The following are some examples and activities in each of the major genre of literature. These activities can easily be adapted to different grade levels by changing the materials and directions.

Fantasy

Two excellent books in the fantasy genre are *Cats of Myth* (Hausman, 2000) and *Puss in Boots* (Perrault, 1990). Both books use wonderful, rich language to describe cats. Activities to use:

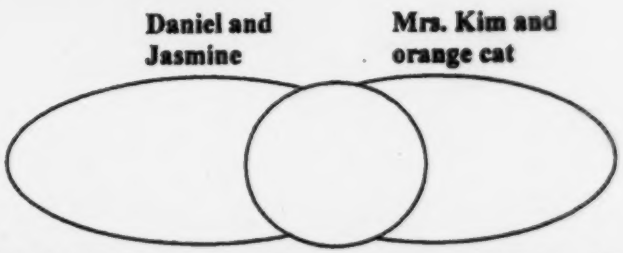
Step Grammar: The reader fills in each part of story grammar as they read the story. Using a graphic organizer helps children to organize the various parts of the story.



Story maps: (see an example of *Trait Maps* under Informational genre). This type of graphic organizer can be used for story grammar, too.

Realistic Fiction

Smoky Night (Bunting, 1994) is an American Caldecott winner. This story is an excellent one to use in a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast.



The readers lists all the points or ideas from the story that are about Daniel and Jasmine on the left and those about Mrs. Kim and the orange cat on the right. Items that tell about both characters are written in the middle of the diagram. This organizer helps readers determine the likenesses and differences between the characters. Discussion about the placement of items in a particular area helps develop more understanding.

Smokey Night is an excellent book to use for writing, too. The cats have no dialogue. The students could write what they believe the cats are saying during the crisis or how the two families interact after the riots.

Poetry

Introducing children to all types of poetry expands their appreciation of this craft and provides another way to use words. In *I am the Cat* (Scheertje, 1990) this lovely poem describes a typical cat action:

She flows around my ankles, lapping in soft gray waves against my legs.

Word Banks. Have the children brainstorm all the words they know that tell about cats. When brainstorming, write the words as they come from the children. Later rewrite the words on tag board or chart paper, then they can be used for a huge variety of purposes. The children can rearrange the words into catorgies such as:

alphabetizing
classifying phonologically - sounds, syllables, vowels, structural analysis
syntax – nouns, verbs, adverbs
antonyms/synonyms
categories – actions, colors, traits

The words make a bank to use for:

writing using frame sentences (The cat is _____.)
writing stories, poetry, presentations
game activity

Information/non-fiction/content reading

How to Talk to Your Cat (George, 2000) is an excellent book written in narrative nonfiction style. One section describes the "vocabulary" a cat uses to comminute. Check students' comprehension by having them read the descriptions of a cat's meows and then demonstrate the "language" the cat is using.

Data sheets help students organize information they gain from their reading.

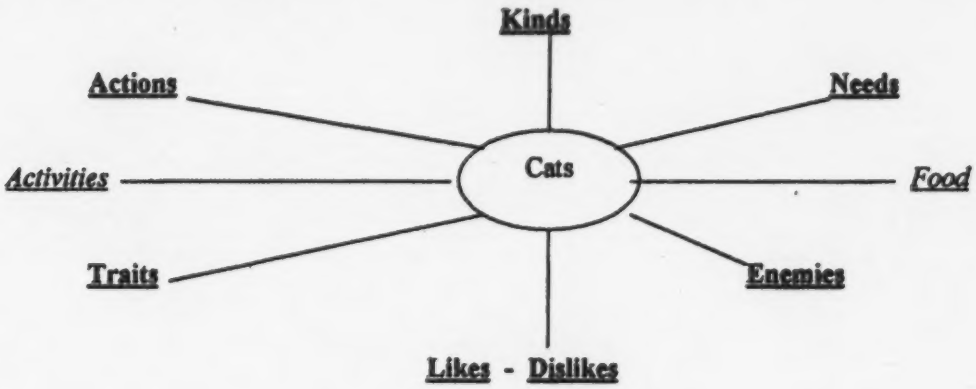
Data Chart for Summarizing Information

Books	What is the best food to feed cats?	What kind of care does a cat need?	How do cats communicate?
Bonners, Susan. (1998). *Why Does the Cat do that?*			
Gutman, Bill. (1997). Becoming You Cat's Best Friend			
Richards, James. (1999). *Complete Guide to Cats.*			
Taylor, David. (1989). *The Ultimate Cat Book*			
Summary			

A data chart can be used in several different ways. A different child reads each of the books and writes the answers to each question. Then the children meet in a group with the readers of the other books and compare the information. Last, the group writes a summary of the information together.

This approach allows readers at different levels to gather the same information when the teacher carefully chooses the book to give to each reader. This permits children reading at a variety of levels to have exposure to other readers' ways of obtaining and organizing information. Another way to use a data sheet is to have each child read all the books and then do her own summary of the information.

Traits maps help readers pull together information they have been gathering. Any words or ideas can be used for the categories. The readers list all the words they have found that tell about each descriptor.



More writing activities

- Create a new ending for the story
- Change the time and location of the story
- Write and illustrate from the cat's point of view
- Write a biography of their own cat

Oral activities

- Interview a cat owner or veterinarian and share the information
- Panel presentations on cats
- Video presentations
- Reader's Theater
- Puppets
- Mime

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS WHEN USING AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH:

- Comprehension is easier for the reader when new knowledge is connected to existing background knowledge.

- Do not address a single topic such as cats, teddy bears, etc., but rather address broader areas such as life cycles, appeal, traits, value.

- Over-plan resources and activities to accommodate students' interests. Attempt to have approximately 50-75 books and a variety of reading materials in all genres and include electronic materials.

- Have a variety of hands-on lessons, different ways of organizing information, graphs, charts, speeches, videos; paired activities, whole-class lessons, small-group work. Use mini-lessons to teach specific skills as they are needed.

- Use the topic as an outline to study research, organization, and presentation activities that adapt to the needs and interests of students through meaningful content and authentic uses of summarizing, retelling, predicting, verifying, and questioning.

- Highlight the importance of students developing knowledge and skills that derive from a variety of academic disciplines.

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http://www.cfainc.org Cat Fanciers Association

http://www.cindydrew.com/cats Information and facts about cats

http://www.geocities.com/athena/troy/5059/cat.html Lists of books about cats

http://www.citizenlunchbox.com/famous/animals.html Famous cats and their owners

http://www.mania.com.au/~pshaw Books and activities as well as links to a wealth of information about cats

http://www.factmonster.com/spot/quiz/famouscats/1.html Quiz about famous cats in books

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